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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 001149

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TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL BO

SUBJECT: LOCAL ELECTION PROCESS DOES NOT LOOK PROMISING FOR DEMOCRACY

REF: MINSK 1056

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stegart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (SBU) The Belarusian Central Election Committee (CEC) approved a calendar of the process for the January 14, 2007 local council elections, listing the dates territorial election commissions are to be formed, the time period for nominees to gather signatures(and the date marking the beginning of the campaign. Although the process has the veneer of transparency, recent history, the new election code amendments, and statements made by the Belarusian president indicate that the CEC will again take the necessary steps to ensure a "thunderous victory" for the regime candidates, as it did with Lukashenko in the stolen March 2006 presidential elections. End summary.

CEC Praised One Amendment, Ignores the Rest

¶2. (SBU) On October 10, Lukashenko approved the amendments to the Electoral Code (reftel). The state media announced the changes, but mainly focused on the elimination of second-round voting and the USD 13.3 million it would save the national budget. Head of the Central Election Committee (CEC) Lidiya Yermoshina and the state media largely ignoreD the other amendments, only stating that they were not revolutionary and that most voters would not perceive any changes at all.

¶3. (C) Human rights lawyers from the Belarusian Helsinki Commission Garry Pogonayilo and Oleg Gulak in an October 13 meeting with Emboffs agreed that the elimination of second-round voting was not problematic. However, they viewed the remaining amendments as means to strengthen the GOB's "Soviet style" electoral system in which elected officials were in reality government appointees. In a recent meeting with the CEC, one of Yermoshina's deputies indirectly confirmed to Gulak that the purpose of the amendments was to "merely bring the law into compliance with existing local practices."

Election Commissions Without Opposition, Again

¶4. (U) The CEC recently approved a calendar of important dates in the election process in accordance with Belarus' Electoral Code. Incumbent local soviets and executive committees are to establish oblast, regional, city, and Minsk city level election committees by October 20, precinct committees by October 30, and polling station election

committees by November 29. Registered political parties, labor collectives, and civil society and initiative groups are allowed to nominate individuals to the election committees. However, opposition political parties reported on October 23 that the CEC thus far has refused to include any of their nominees.

Registration of Opposition Candidates an Uphill Battle

15. (U) The CEC calendar also stipulates that political parties, labor collectives, and initiative groups have from November 4 to December 5 to nominate candidates for the 22,641 available council seats. Individuals nominated by registered parties and organizations must only fill out the necessary paperwork (including income and asset declarations), but those nominated by initiative groups and unregistered parties and organizations must collect signatures. The vast majority of opposition parties and NGOs will have to submit signatures, because their organizations are generally not registered in the election districts where they plan to compete. The number of signatures needed depends on the size of the district, ranging from 150 signatures for Minsk city and oblast councils to 20 signatures for small city and village councils. Nominees and their support teams may distribute the nominees' biographical data while collecting signatures, but are strictly prohibited from campaigning or distributing campaign material.

16. (U) The United Democratic Forces (UDF) plans to nominate 700-900 candidates. Out of that figure, the United Civic Party (UCP) is nominating 200 candidates, the BNF - 180 candidates, the Belarusian Party of Communists - 130, and the

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Belarusian Social-Democratic Party - 100. Nominees must submit all signatures and paperwork to their respective local election commissions by December 4. Territorial and precinct commissions have from December 5 to December 14 to verify the signatures and register the nominees as candidates. Once registered, candidates can immediately begin campaigning until January 13, the day before Election Day.

17. (C) Deputy Chairman of the Belarusian National Front (BNF) Viktor Ivashkevich predicted to Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff October 18 that most opposition nominees would not be registered as candidates. Citing the 2003 local council and 2004 parliamentary elections, Ivashkevich noted the election committees' practice of eliminating nearly all pro-democracy candidates at this stage for "discrepancies" in their nomination or signature lists. In 2003, the CEC only registered a handful of BNF's nominees. The CEC apparently denied registration to those individuals nominated by registered opposition party chapters on the basis that the nominees failed to gather signatures, even though the law exempted them from this requirement. Ivashkevich expects the situation to be the same in the upcoming elections, if not worse, given Lukashenko's recent statements that the approximately 85 existing opposition local council deputies should not be re-elected to local councils. On October 13, Lukashenko told reporters that "businesslike" individuals, such as teachers, doctors, factory workers, and peasants who are not "politicized" or "vocal" should be elected to the councils.

Restrictions on Meetings and Campaign Financing

18. (SBU) Another controversial amendment requires candidates to apply to the local authorities five days in advance for permission to hold meetings with voters outdoors. Once permission is granted, the meetings can take place only in areas designated by the local authorities. In previous elections, candidates were not required by law to apply for permission, although in practice authorities often used this

pretext to prevent or disrupt such meetings. Another amendment allows the CEC to deny registration to candidates using foreign financial or material assistance, including the use of material printed abroad. The last clause is extremely disadvantageous for opposition candidates, who are often barred from Belarusian printing presses and forced to print in Russia and Lithuania.

Greater Restrictions on Election Observation

¶ 19. (SBU) Domestic election observers must be official members of registered organizations and can no longer be delegated representatives. Pro-democratic organizations view this new requirement as a way for the GOB to "legally" exclude opposition and independent observation groups from monitoring the election process, given that the GOB-sanctioned process for membership in non-state organizations is time-consuming and cumbersome.

A Notorious CEC

¶ 10. (SBU) The likely reappointment of CEC members implicated in past election manipulations also sheds doubt on the transparency of the upcoming elections. CEC members' terms expire in January 2007, but by October 12, nominations were already completed and submitted to Lukashenko for approval. Half of the incumbent CEC members, including Yermoshina and her Secretary Nikolai Lozovik--both on the U.S. and EU visa bans for their direct involvement in the manipulation of the 2006 presidential elections--were nominated.

Comment

¶ 11. (C) The regime is doing its best via public statements and the state media to convince the public that the local elections will be free and fair. Fortunately, the opposition understands the importance of going through the election process and are not following the suggestion of former head of state Stanislav Shushkevich that the local elections should be boycotted. Opposition forces, however, are convinced the elections will be more fraudulent than those in 2003; We also expect the same irregularities and violations in this election that we witnessed in previous elections. We will likely observe the exclusion of pro-democracy representatives from all election commissions, the denial of

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registration to opposition candidates, and blatant government interference in opposition campaigns. To the extent the regime has determined the international community is not focused on Belarus' local council elections, the authorities' may even feel more emboldened to undermine the opposition's efforts to contest the local races. We will continue to highlight the abuses committed by the regime in the run up to the election and will encourage our European colleagues in Belarus to do the same.
Stewart